Distorting the Historical Record

One Detailed Example from the Albert Shanker Institute's Report

Perhaps the most glaring error in these textbooks is the treatment of the role that unions and labor activists played as key participants in the civil rights movement. For example, while coverage is thin on the relationship between organized labor and the civil rights movement in the 1940s, it is virtually nonexistent from the 1950s on.

In general, the textbook coverage of the civil rights movement is quite good, but the omission of organized labor's contribution to that movement is deeply problematic

can workers into nonsegregated unions. In addition, organized labor provided crucial support to the civil rights movement from the 1940s through the 1960s, most of which the textbooks ignore.

The textbooks do mention A. Philip Randolph (the founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who led the union's 12-year fight for recognition by the Pullman Company and won the union entry into the AFL) as both a union leader and a civil rights leader.4 The books

and organized the United Rubber Workers during and after World War II.5

Likewise, none of the textbooks mentions E. D. Nixon, a leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and an associate of A. Philip Randolph. Nixon was also a leader of the NAACP in Alabama and the initial organizer of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Montgomery Improvement Association, which managed the boycott. There is no mention in the textbooks of the role of union support for the boycott.6 Finally, none of these texts introduces students to Bayard Rustin, a master strategist and hero of both the labor and civil rights movements, and the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and into the '80s, Rustin was instrumental in linking organized labor and the civil rights movement.7

Moreover, the textbooks simply fail to reflect the extent and depth of organized labor's support for the civil rights movement, and how closely the two movements—labor rights and civil rights—were intertwined. This close relationship between labor and civil rights is often called "civil rights unionism."8

Just a few examples of omitted content on labor and civil rights can demonstrate the extent to which textbooks ignore labor's contributions to the modern civil rights struggle. Consider the contributions of just a few of the many unions that supported civil rights that are not covered in history textbooks. For example, the United Auto Workers (UAW) sent money to support the Montgomery bus boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., endorsed a national boycott of Woolworth stores to integrate their lunch counters, and funded voter registration drives in predominantly black areas. In 1963 alone, the union donated \$100,000 to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.9 King worked out of the national UAW headquarters when he and Rustin were planning the March on Washington. Two months before the March, some 150,000 supporters of civil rights marched in Detroit, led by UAW President Walter Reuther and King. UAW members bused in large numbers of marchers.¹⁰

Early in its history, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters would not allow Southern locals to follow the practice of segregation, and threatened to pull charters in cases where this rule was



Above: As these signs remind us, the 1963 March on Washington was for jobs and freedom. The ties between labor and civil rights were so strong that while planning the march, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked in the United Auto Workers' headquarters in

and seriously distorts the historical record. To be sure, unions have their own troubled history of racial discrimination, with many unions banning the inclusion of African American members through the 19th and early 20th centuries.2 Nonetheless, African American workers understood quite well that they needed to organize to protect their rights. Accordingly, in New York City in 1850, black workers formed the American League of Colored Laborers, the first organization of black workers.3

Beginning in the 1930s, however, most large unions began to recruit African Americoncentrate on Randolph's 1941 plan for a march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in the military industries and to propose the desegregation of the American armed forces, which led to the Fair Employment Act, an early success for civil rights advocates. When the textbooks move into the 1950s, however, they ignore other strong links between leaders of organized labor and the civil rights movement.

The textbooks do not cover the extent to which many civil rights activists were also labor activists and leaders, and how closely intertwined the struggle for African American workers' labor rights was with the struggle for civil rights. Consider union leaders such as Clarence Coe, who played a key role in building the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Memphis in the 1930s, worked at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company,



Above: Bayard Rustin, the architect of the March on Washington, joins Albert Shanker, president of New York City's United Federation of Teachers, for a rally in support of paraprofessionals in 1970.

violated. By 1906, editorials in the Teamsters' magazine were making impassioned pleas for all local unions, but especially those in the South, to organize African American workers. The union supported the work of King and provided money and supplies to many civil rights groups, including more than 700 families living in "Freedom Village," who faced retribution for registering to vote in 1960.11 And, few Americans today know of Viola Liuzzo, a civil rights activist and the wife of a Teamster business agent; Liuzzo was shot and killed on March 25, 1965, by Ku Klux Klansmen while driving a Selma marcher home. King, Teamster leaders (including Teamster General President James R. Hoffa, who offered a \$5,000 reward for the capture and conviction of those who murdered Liuzzo),12 and other labor and civil rights leaders attended her funeral.13

Another example of union support for the civil rights movement: in 1960, when the Woolworth store sit-ins began in the South, the New York Central Labor Council organized picketing at the Woolworth

stores in New York City. Such unions as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union contributed upward of 800 picketers per day.14

There are many more examples of union participation in the area of civil rights. For instance, the **American Federation** of Teachers and its locals supported the civil rights movement in many ways, including by filing an amicus brief in support of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, by actively supporting the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and by giving King more than \$40,000 worth of station wagons to be used in the voter registration drive in Selma. Alabama. In 1963, AFL-

CIO President George Meany paid \$160,000 in bail to release King and 2,000 protesters being held in a Birmingham jail.

Other omissions reveal selective bias quite clearly. One glaring example: King was murdered in Memphis in 1968 while he was aiding a unionization effort of black Memphis sanitation workers under the auspices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference made the Memphis struggle a focal point of its Southern cities organization effort. King believed that unionization was a key part of the struggle for civil rights. Yet, while the textbooks mention the reason why King was in Memphis, none mentions the specific union involved in the strike—clearly a central actor—by name. Worse, not one mentions King's strong belief that labor rights and civil rights were inextricably linked.

In 1961, King spoke to the AFL-CIO on the shared values of the organized labor and civil rights movements. This speech should be included in all U.S. history textbooks. In the speech, King declared:15

Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of

those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations. sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

We want to rely upon the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forward the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke it in those who have not vet felt it in their hearts. But we know that if we are not simultaneously organizing our strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way, labor's historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

Finally, there is no mention in the textbooks of labor's role in supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.16 In short, the picture painted by U.S. history textbooks simply airbrushes labor out of this vital historical period and, in the process, paints an incomplete picture of both the labor and civil rights movements. П

Endnotes

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- 16. William Jennings Bryan, The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1925), 535, 539, 543.
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- 18. See Ronald L. Numbers, The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design, expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
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- 21. Eugenie C. Scott, "The Evolution of Creationism: The Struggle for the Schools," *Natural History* 103, no. 10 (1994): 12-13
- 22. For an accessible explanation of this, see Francisco Ayala, Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion (Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), 59-61.
- 23. Eugenie C. Scott, Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California
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- 8. For example, Jon Bekken's 1994 analysis of journalism curricula found unions to be neglected or unrepresented. See Jon Bekken, "The Portrayal of Labor in Reporting Textbooks: Critical Absences, Hostile Voices" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, GA, August 10-13, 1994), www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ ED375414.pdf.
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- 11. See Danzer et al., The Americans, 708-709
- 12. From the proclamation, printed in the Boston Evening Transcript, February 18, 1834. See also, Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills: 'The Oppressing Hand of Avarice Would Enslave Us," Labor History 16 (1975): 99–116, www.invention.smithsonian.org/ centerpieces/whole cloth/u2ei/u2materials/dublin.html. As Dublin notes, "At several points in the proclamation the women drew on their Yankee heritage. Connecting their turn-out with the efforts of their 'Patriotic Ancestors' to secure independence from England, they interpreted the

wage cuts as an effort to 'enslave' them—to deprive them of the independent status as 'daughters of freemen.'" Dublin points out that this proclamation (and, we believe, many of the group's other writings) makes clear that the women saw their right to band together to fight for better pay and working conditions as a natural outgrowth of the rights defended by their ancestors in the American Revolution and enshrined in the Constitution.

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- 7. For more on Bayard Rustin's life and the new award-winning documentary Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin, see www.rustin.org.
- 8. For an analysis of civil rights unionism and the forces that shaped it, see Michael Honey, "A Dream Deferred," The Nation, May 3, 2004. Honey, a professor at the University of Washington. writes: "It is crucial to remember that Brown was as much the product as the precipitator of mass movements. Yes, the decision resulted from the incredibly hard-working and astute battle led by Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and others in the NAACP. But it also resulted from mass movements and a vast shift in status among poor and working-class African-Americans, millions of whom moved out of rural areas and into cities and massproduction industries in the 1930s and '40s. They created an expanding membership base for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NAACP and an American left that challenged segregation at every level. Domestic workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, factory workers and other poor people, especially the women among them, organized economic boycotts, picket lines, marches, sit-ins, strikes, church and community groups, unions, consumer cooperatives and mass meetings. Their role as workers. soldiers and activists in the fight against white supremacy at home and fascism abroad created vast social changes that set the stage for Brown. As one example, in the Deep South city of Memphis, African-Americans, who had been organizing unions since after the Civil War, provided the main support that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union could cost one's life. The purge of the interracial left from the CIO during the cold war undermined civil rights unionism, vet a number of black industrial unionists continued to challenge white supremacy in the 1950s and '60s. Union wages also made it more possible to send children to college, and some of those students led sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow.
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